

# Taking the Art to the Streets: How the Citizens of Los Angeles Saved Watts Towers

## Abstract

Jo Farb Hernández

When the assorted community activists and artists banded together in 1959 to save Sabato Rodia's Towers from City bureaucrats who decreed demolition, sneering that if Pisa's Leaning Tower were in L.A. they'd take that down too, the genre of art environments had not yet even been defined. Those "ordinary" citizens, whose fight against City Hall was later buoyed by national names like Buckminster Fuller and Carl Sandburg, only knew that this was a series of sculptures and monuments that enlivened their spirits, and that they must not be destroyed. They worked hard to do so—and are *still* working hard, more than fifty years after the success of the stress test proving that the Towers were strong and stable, capable of withstanding any earthquake, hail storm, or rain torrent that might occur in L.A.—and some of the original Committee members, along with new recruits, are *still* clashing with City departments in order to ascertain that the ongoing conservation work is done correctly and professionally.

This decades-long battle—waged on a city, county, and state level by media-savvy citizens in one of our country's most populous cities, boasting a wealth of knowledge and sophistication and appreciation for art in its various forms—was never, across the years, easy, nor has it been completely successful. Although the Towers still stand, now honored with municipal, state, and national historic landmark status, they have been subjugated to sloppy and ineffective conservation, insensitive and unattractive boundary fencing which closes them off from the local neighborhood, and significant loss of components to the elements, to incompetence, and to theft. And this is one of the success stories in the field.

This powerpoint presentation will feature vintage photographs by Seymour Rosen of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, created by Sabato Rodia ca. 1921-1954, during the community campaign to save them from demolition, in order to show how public outcry was instrumental in preventing their dismantling and removal. It will include a brief narrative about the Towers and the checkered history of their preservation as the ownership passed from private to non-profit to City to State, set against a more general consideration of the conservation issues inherent in the protection of art environments world-wide.

Jo Farb Hernández, Director of SPACES – Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments—a nonprofit archives documenting art environments and self-taught arts, is also Director of the Thompson Art Gallery and Professor in the School of Art and Design at San José State University. She has worked in the museum field for thirty-five years while continuing to document and write about art environments; among other projects, she serves as Contributing Editor for *Raw Vision* magazine, member of the National Advisory Board for North Carolina's Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park, and member of the International Advisory Board for Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park.

She has authored or co-authored over thirty award-winning books and exhibition catalogues; recipient of a 2008 Fulbright Senior Scholar award, she is writing a comprehensive book on Spanish art environments.